I love nature

by Mari Reeves

"I love nature." It's what my field crew and I have been saying to each other all summer. "I love nature," as the eye-level spruce branch thwacks abruptly into my waiting face. "I love nature," as I pull the bug net down around my neck in response to the sharp pricks on my shoulders and the never-ending buzz in my ears. "I love nature," as my foot punches through the bog mat into the untold depths of unstable peat moss and water below, hip wader filling with brown muck and heaven forbid, leeches. I yank it back up, recovering concentration on my path with a start. I love nature.

I work in nature. I'm a biologist.

Nature can be a difficult place sometimes, especially in Alaska. I often think of our state as possessing the soul of a manic depressive woman. First she lures you in with her mystery and beauty and maternal abundance, then she threatens you with a landscape bigger than you are and the dangers of residing in the dark near, but beneath, the top of the food chain.

Alaska's lure lies in everlasting pink and gold sunsets. It shines from snow-capped green mountains with cracked ice-blue glaciers in their crooked elbows. The vast tracts of wilderness sing their siren song, untouched and untrammeled by mankind. There is incomparable beauty in the never-ending light of the three-month long arctic summer, and the mystical dark of winter dances with flickering, colored northern lights. I have flashes of gratitude for the beauty, which I call Alaska Moments.

Nevertheless I said bipolar for a reason, as the more unsettling moments exist, too. In the summer, the rivers fill with glacial water running fast and there are moose and grizzlies in the alders. In the winter the light never intensifies beyond the golden pink hues of early morning and the twilit blues of late afternoon. The slopes rising thousands of feet above tree line threaten unspeakably large avalanches. The sting of winter cold, while exhilarating, carries with it the unspoken threat of life on the sidelines of our warm and cozy civilization. The dangers that lurk in the Alaskan woods, extreme cold, everlasting dark, large avalanches and wild animals make me more nervous outdoors here than I am in other, gentler, places.

In our quest for biology to research, we are standing at the edge of one of the lakes on the far southwest end of the Swanson River Canoe Route, in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, a four-hour paddle and portage from the trailhead. We're tired from portaging the canoe and all of our camping and field gear, yet because of the compressed timing of biological events during the Alaskan summer, we press on to survey a few ponds after setting up camp.

We point our compass in the direction indicated by our weathered topographic map in its ziploc bag. The bearing points us into a dense thicket of two-inch diameter spruce spaced one to three feet apart. We should see our pond in about half a mile. The twelve-gauge shotgun we shoulder for bear protection catches and hangs up on the spruce boughs we squirm through. The mosquitoes and black flies buzz in the sheltered woods. The moss and lichen beneath our feet crunch with uncharacteristic dryness, the result of three atypically dry summers in a row, themselves the result of a changing global climate.

Tired though we are, we follow the compass arrow diligently, not wanting to stray from our course through the forest. An edge of anxiety rides on my shoulders, I am pushed just that tiniest bit beyond my comfort zone in these woods, being too tired in this situation. I channel the nervous energy into bear avoidance and dredge any snippets of college fight songs from my memory to shout them at the top of my lungs to the woods at large. When I fade off, my coworker rallies with her own tunes. Our nervousness seems to be good for something, as today we don't see any bears.

After surveying our last pond, we pull out the map to navigate back, and my tired mind blanks briefly on compass skills. As I stare at the colored paper and the spinning circular object, the pang of fear returns. I'm freaked out by the tiredness, the dark spruce forest, and the disorientation. We pull it together eventually and get back on track to the canoe and to camp.

Moments like these, when I feel disoriented and just a little bit scared, are the moments during which I understand some of the impulses of prior generations of humanity. It made good sense to cut the forests, and fill the swamps, and dose the mosquitoes with

fast acting fogs of DDT. Humans generally prefer human habitat to the wild. Nevertheless, when cooped up in the car stopped in traffic, or speeding along in a subway train, or stuck in front of my computer in my fluorescent-lit office for hours on end, I wonder how well suited to this engineered human environment we really are. I am more at peace with the world when I can at least think about the nature that I know is still there; nature in all its uncivilized, buggy, catch-as-catch-can glory. Its mere presence makes me feel better.

Which is why I do love nature. I love that its rivers and oceans wash away life's stresses and give me peace. I love the quiet of the lake at the end of the day and the lonely, wafting cry of the loon in the late dusky arctic evening. I love the blankets of snow that cover this place in the winter and quiet the land. I love the fact that I have to turn around on trail runs because a moose and her two calves stare unflinchingly from the woods ahead. And I accept the bugs, the dense spruce, and the swamps because without them we wouldn't have the moose, and the birds, and the frogs (although I do sometimes like to kill mosquitoes). I love nature because it takes me out of my comfort zone, makes me grow, teaches me humility, and offers me peace.

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